

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 001038

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TAGS: PREL CN XO FR

SUBJECT: FRANCE/COMOROS: AZALI VISIT

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Embassy Africa watcher met February 16 with Remi Marechaux, MFA DAS-equivalent for southern Africa and the Indian Ocean, for a read-out on Comoran President Azali Assoumani's January 31-February 2 official visit to France. Marechaux said that the visit was largely symbolic, as part of an effort to rehabilitate Azali, a former putschist. France's message, he said, was to convey to Azali that France believed that the crisis in the Comoros was over and that the union of the three islands would work. Azali, he said, was reminded about his commitment to leave office in 2006. In response to our noting press accounts that Azali was happy with his visit, Marechaux said that if Azali was happy, France was happy.

¶2. (C) Marechaux said that Azali (and other Indian Ocean state leaders) had expressed no concern about the postponement of the Indian Ocean summit in Antananarivo until July, reportedly to enable French President Chirac to focus on preparations for the referendum on the EU constitution. Marechaux said that Azali's meetings with Chirac and FM Barnier had been brief; 45 and 25 minutes respectively. Cooperation Minister Darcos hosted a dinner for Azali and 150 other guests and the President of the National Assembly also organized a highly ceremonial reception. According to Marechaux, the principal topic of discussion was the Comoros engagements with the IFIs in order to move via a Staff Monitored program to a Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility, and thence to HIPC eligibility. Press reports state that Chirac pledged France's support for Comoros in the IFIs.

¶3. (C) Marechaux said that Comoros' territorial claim over Mayotte complicated telecommunications issues. Although a French territory, French callers had to dial the international access code for Comoros, and those in Mayotte the code for France. No change was possible he said, without the assent of the International Telecommunications Union, and Comoros had blocked any change. Mayotte, he said, also encountered difficulty in fielding sports teams, particularly soccer teams, in regional competitions because of Comoran objections to the French flag on team shirts. Marechaux said that the two sides were stuck on the territorial claim, with Comoros regarding it as a matter of national pride. France, he said, was constitutionally barred from ceding territory without the consent of its inhabitants who, in three referenda since 1975, had voted overwhelmingly to remain part of France.

¶4. (C) Marechaux said that he would be traveling to Comoros at the end of February to discuss these issues in preparation for the France/Comoros mixed commission meetings in April. The mixed commission, he said, would also discuss security of Comoros' frontiers, focusing particularly on the traffic in persons and goods to Mayotte. Marechaux said that Mayotte's (and thus, France's) problems mostly stemmed from Anjouan. Marechaux said that France wanted to send one or two gendarmes to Anjouan, but the Comorans had so far refused. The French also propose establishing a regular ferry service between Anjouan and Mayotte which, they hope, will undercut the smugglers. Marechaux reaffirmed French policy towards Anjouan President Bacar, who is seeking independence from the Comoros. Bacar was received last week by the MFA Africa director, having refused a similar meeting three weeks earlier, believing that he should be received at a higher level. Although Anjouan continues to operate as an independent state, Marechaux said, France supports the union and the Fomboni process, and Bacar will not be received by anyone above the Director's level.

¶5. (C) Marechaux told us of two other French-inspired initiatives for the Comoros. During President Chirac's visit to Libya, Qadhafi had expressed interest in undertaking projects in Africa. Chirac had suggested road construction in the Comoros and the Libyans had agreed. Marechaux was unable to put a figure on the Libyan project. The second initiative was to allow Comoran potatoes and onions to be shipped and sold for consumption in Mayotte notwithstanding EU regulations. The Comorans, according to Marechaux, had pressed for free access for a wider range of produce but, he said, the GoF had reminded them that the EU had begun as a coal and steel project.

¶6. (C) Marechaux explained the lack of a Comoran Ambassador

in France as being the result of the Embassy's failure to pay any of its 1.5 million euros in debts to various creditors, many of whom were constantly pressing the MFA for action. France barred assignment of new Comoran diplomats in 2001 and even contributed 100,000 euros in 2004. However despite repeated urging by France to address the Embassy's debt problems, the debts continued to grow, Marechaux said.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Marechaux and Africa watcher have had frequent contact over two assignments and six years. He said that he would prefer to be spending his time on Zimbabwe or South Africa. He said he spends about 40 per cent of his time on the Comoros. His often cynical description of his work on the Comoros undoubtedly reflects a frustration with having to deal with France's closest African neighbor (100 kms from Mayotte). However, he also said that he does what he likes on Comoros as none of his superiors is interested. He left us with the impression that for France, dealings with the Comoros were largely an unfortunate necessity born of proximity. END COMMENT.

Leach